



Great Lakes VA HEALTHVIEWS

The Newsletter about Health for Veterans in VISN 12



Volume 2, Issue 4

Winter 2004

Hello, My Name is Stroke



What every Veteran should know about me.

What is Stroke?

Stroke is the third most common cause of death in America. It is also a leading cause of long-term disability.

Stroke is a disease that affects the arteries of the brain. The brain requires a constant flow of blood for proper functioning. A stroke occurs when a blood vessel bringing blood to the brain gets blocked or ruptures. Without blood, the nerve cells in that area of the brain die within a few minutes. This causes the parts of the body controlled by that area of the brain to stop functioning.

If blood flow to the brain is only interrupted for a short time, the effects of stroke are temporary. This is called Transient Ischemic Attack or TIA. But if blood flow in the brain

is cut off completely, the effects of stroke are often permanent.

What are the Risk Factors for Stroke?

Knowing your risk factors is the key to stroke prevention! Some risk factors, like age, sex, race, family history and a prior stroke, can't be changed. But there are risk factors you can change or treat:

- **High blood pressure-** This is the single most treatable risk factor. Treat your high blood pressure to reduce your risk of stroke.
- **Diabetes-** If you have diabetes work with your health care providers to control it.

- **Atrial fibrillation (or irregular heartbeat) and other heart diseases-** Heart disease increases your risk of stroke. Treatment with blood thinners will reduce your risk of stroke. Ask your doctor whether you have an irregular heart rate or any other heart problem.
- **High blood cholesterol-** High blood cholesterol increases your risk of stroke. Have your cholesterol checked regularly. Ask your doctor for advice to reduce your cholesterol level.
- **TIAs and prior stroke-** If you had a stroke or a TIA in the past it's more likely you could have another one. Follow the advice of your doctor to prevent another stroke.
- **Asymptomatic carotid artery disease-** Fatty buildup in the carotid arteries, or neck blood vessels, usually starts long before a person has a stroke. Your doctor can check to see if you have this build up. Ask your doctor whether your neck blood vessels are clear.
- **Tobacco use-** Smoking cigarettes produces damage to blood vessels all over the body. Do not smoke cigarettes or use other forms of tobacco.
- **Excessive alcohol intake-** Excessive use of alcohol increases the risk of stroke.
- **Illegal drug use-** Cocaine use or IV drug abuse has been linked to stroke.
- **Physical inactivity and obesity-**

Being physically inactive or obese increases risk of stroke. Any type of physical activity is useful.

How will I know I am having a stroke?

A specific area of the brain controls every function of the body. Therefore, the symptoms of stroke vary depending on what area of the brain is involved. You and your family should know the warning signs of stroke:

- **Sudden** weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- **Sudden** confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- **Sudden** trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- **Sudden** trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- **Sudden**, severe headache with no known cause

What should I do if I think I am having a stroke?

Time is very important for emergency treatment of stroke. Medicines available in the emergency room need to be given within the first **three hours** of the beginning of a stroke. During those three hours many tests need to be done.

If you have any of the stroke warning signs, **don't** ignore them, even if they go away. Make a note of the time the symptoms started and **call 911**. Timing is very important!

What if I am a stroke survivor?

A stroke survivor may feel isolated with the changes and losses resulting from a stroke. But, you are not alone. We can help you! Health care providers at your VA understand. The VA has a lot to offer in the way of treatment, therapies, equipment, and resources. Your VA doctors will order tests, medicines, and therapies to help you on your way to the best recovery possible.

While you are in a VA hospital, you will be followed by a neurologist and other specialists necessary for your well-being. You will work with your nurses, therapists, dietitian, and social worker. It is important that you and your family ask questions and ask for help. Your social worker will be able to refer you to community resources. There may even be support groups in your community.

What can I do to prevent a stroke?

Prevention of another stroke or a first-time stroke is most important. There are a number of things you can do:

- **Keep your clinic appointments** so that your doctor is aware of how you are doing and can make any needed changes in your

treatment.

- **Keep your blood pressure at healthy levels.** Take your medicines and watch your diet. Exercise helps your blood pressure too.
- **If you are diabetic, keep your blood sugar within the recommended range.** Take your medicines as directed by your doctor.
- **Eat a healthy diet with a healthy weight in mind.** Your VA dietitian can help you.
- **Be physically active.** Do as much as you can within the recommendations of your doctor. Your physical therapist can also guide you. See the related article on “Increasing Activity Can Prevent Stroke.”
- **If you are a smoker, stop smoking.** The VA can help you quit all tobacco use.

REMEMBER, you are not alone!:

Your VA is ready, willing and able to help.

Sudha R. Gupta, MD
Assistant Chief of Neurology
Hines VA Hospital

Susan Karshen, LCSW, C-ASWCM
Outpatient Social Worker
Hines VA Hospital

Source: American Stroke Association
<http://www.strokeassociation.org>

Increasing Activity Can Prevent Stroke



Whether you have had a stroke in the past or are trying to prevent one, activity can help! Check with your doctor before beginning an activity or exercise program.

To prevent a stroke, try one of the following: Go on a brisk walk, take the stairs, do whatever you can to be more active. Tai Chi is another type of exercise that you can do. It can help you relax, be more flexible, and helps with balance. Try at least 30 minutes of activity on a daily basis or 30 minutes of activity three times a week.

If you are a stroke survivor, you need to be active also. The American Heart Association recommends at least 20 minutes of aerobic exercise three to seven times a week. The new guidelines recommend 20 to 60 minutes of exercise. The sessions do not have to be all at one time. It can be done 10 minutes at a time, with a goal of at least 20 minutes in one day.

You can do strength training if you have muscle weakness. Use one or two-pound weights or exercise bands or tubes. Exercise bands are color-coded. Begin by using the lighter colored one and progress to the darker one. Do one set of 10 to 15 repetitions. This should be done two

to three times a week. Include exercises that involve the major muscle groups.

Stroke survivors should also do stretching and flexibility exercises before and after an aerobic exercise program. Cool down exercises are very important after your exercise session. Add balance and/or coordination exercises if you have balance problems. Balance problems make it more likely you will fall. We suggest you have two to three sessions of balance exercises per week.

Making changes to your lifestyle can prevent strokes. Ask your physical therapist for help with the exercises. Begin doing it NOW!

Ileana Elicier, MBA, PT
Chief, Physical Therapy
Hines VA Hospital

Vijaya Chigurupati, MD
Staff Psychiatrist
Hines VA Hospital

Source: American Stroke Association,
Feb-March 2004 and American Heart Association
<http://www.americanheart.org>

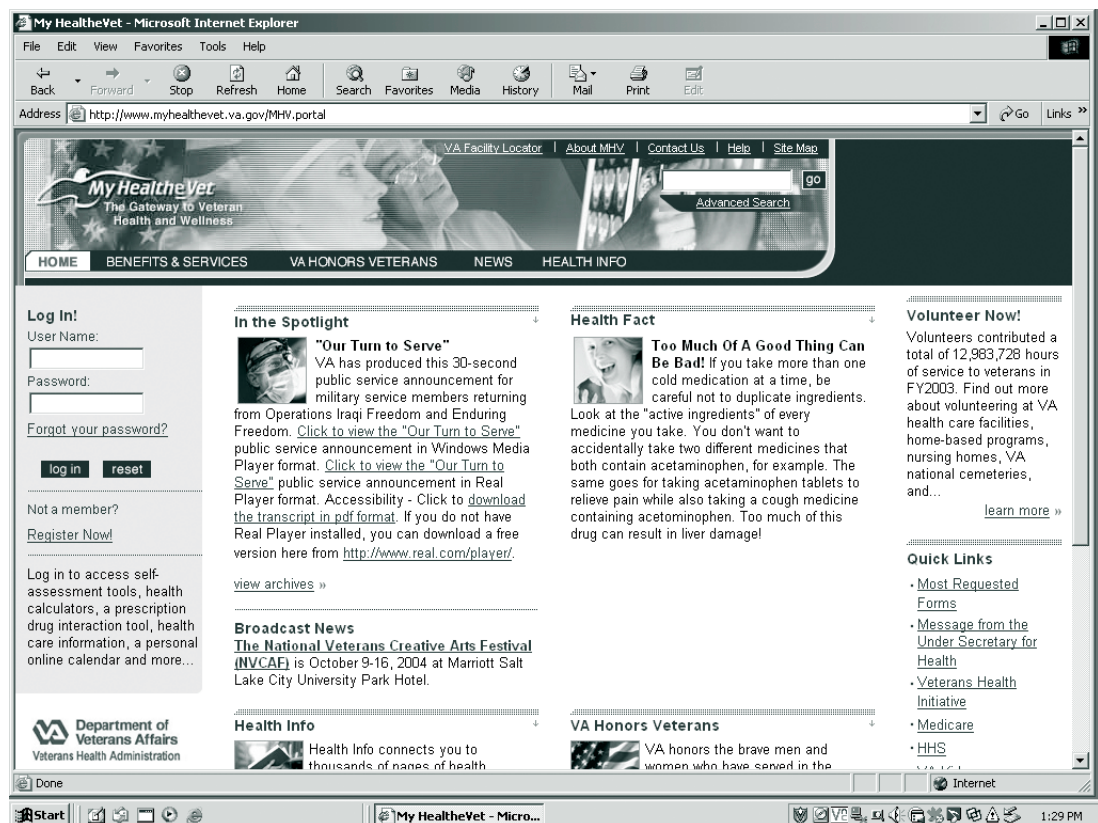
HOME CARE CORNER

Surfing the Net with *My HealtheVet*

Kathleen A. Ford, MSN, RN
Patient Health Education Coordinator
Hines VA Hospital

Did you know there is a computer website that focuses on veterans' health? Did you know that in the future, you will be able to renew prescriptions, view appointments, and read parts of your medical record at this site?

Phase 1 of this site debuted on Veteran's Day 2003. The website is www.myhealth.va.gov. The site is for veterans, caregivers and VA employees.





What is on the website?

At this time, it has:

- VA information, such as benefits and services
- Health information
- “Rx Checker” which allows you to enter the names of your medicines and check for interactions with other medicines and/or foods
- “Anatomy Explorer” shows pictures of muscles and bones
- Other self-assessment tools
- Quick links to other areas, such as Medicare, VA kids, most requested forms, etc

Phase 2 and Phase 3 provide sensitive information to veterans. The developers of the website are working to ensure a secure site. They want to make sure that only you are able to view your own information. Users of the site will need to be approved for access to Phase 2 and Phase 3 information by their local facility. As of the date of this writing (September 2004), how this will be done has not yet been decided.

Phase 2 should be available by spring of 2005. Once you are approved for access to Phase 2 information, you will be able to go online to:

- Refill prescriptions
- View your co-payment balance
- Check the dates of your scheduled appointments
- Enter things, such as your blood pressure and weight, into your medical record

Phase 3 will be rolled out after Phase 2. No timeframe has been given yet. Again, you will need approval by your VA facility before you can access Phase 3 information. Once approved, you will be able to read certain parts of your medical record.

How do I start?

You will need to register at the site before browsing it. Below is the screen that you will see when you click onto “Register Now” on the main screen.

The screenshot shows the My HealtheVet registration page in a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window. The address bar shows the URL: http://www.myhealthevet.va.gov/MHV_portal;jsessionid=BB6x5w07Cy7D4Penm9vu841V59Ph8JRNQubNjbyL7tbtccun913851267457_nfpb=true&_windowLabel=Login&_... The page header includes the My HealtheVet logo and navigation links: HOME, BENEFITS & SERVICES, VA HONORS VETERANS, NEWS, HEALTH INFO. The main content area is titled "Registration" and contains the following text: "You must register in order to gain access to the wealth of information on the My HealtheVet site. The form labels with [required] next to them indicate that it is a required field. If you need help understanding a field, click on the question mark (?) next to the field in question. Once the form is complete, and you have read and acknowledged acceptance of the Terms & Conditions and Privacy Statement of this site, you can submit the form via the 'Submit' button below." The form includes sections for "Create a User Name and Password" and "Personal Information". The "Create a User Name and Password" section has fields for "User Name: [required] (Must be at least 6 characters with no spaces)", "Password: [required] (Minimum of 8 characters, and at least one letter, number, and special character [e.g., !, @, #, \$, %])", "Confirm Password: [required]", "Password Hint: (Select a question and place your answer into the box on the right)" with a dropdown menu showing "What is your pet's name?", and "Answer: [required]". The "Personal Information" section has fields for "First Name: [required]" and "Last Name: [required]". The browser window shows the Start button and taskbar at the bottom.

To register, you need to:

1. Create a User Name and Password. The User Name must be at least 6 characters with no spaces. The Password must be at least 8 characters long and contain at least one letter, one number, and one special character, such as, !, @, #, \$, %, &, *.
2. Answer the “Password Hint” question.
3. Provide your name, zip code, and e-mail address.
4. Indicate if you are a Veteran, VA Patient, VA Employee and/or Care Giver.
5. Check off that you have read the Terms and Conditions and Privacy Policy.
6. Finally, click “Submit.”

The My HealtheVet website was created for you!
Log on today and check it out!

Sources:

My HealtheVet Implementation Strategy-Phases 2 and 3, July 6, 2004 and
My HealtheVet POC Conference Call Highlights, August 17-18, 2004

Your best source for information on your health will always be your doctor or health care provider. We hope this newsletter will encourage you to talk to your health care provider and ask questions about your health concerns.

**Great Lakes VA
Healthviews Editorial
Committee:**

Jill Zahn
Senior Editor
Milwaukee VAMC

Deborah Skoglund
Iron Mountain VAMC

Lance Davis
Madison VAMC

Kathleen Ford
Hines VAH

Kathy Johnson
Tomah VAMC

Alfreda Rhodes-King
North Chicago VAMC

Beverly Speer
Jesse Brown VAMC



Layout and design
Kim Chapman
Medical Media Service
Milwaukee

**Main Phone Numbers
for VISN 12 Hospitals**

Hines:	708-202-VETS (8387)
Iron Mountain:	906-774-3300
Madison:	608-256-1901
Milwaukee:	414-384-2000 or 1-888-469-6614
North Chicago:	1-800-393-0865 or 847-688-1900
Tomah:	1-800-USA-TOMAH 1-800-872-8662 or 608-372-3971
Jesse Brown:	312-569-VETS (8387)

**“Ask An Expert” Question
or Idea for Future Articles**

Do you have an “Ask An Expert” question or an idea for a future article? Your ideas can be e-mailed, mailed, or faxed to the Senior Editor.

E-mail address:
SrEditorGreatLakesVAHealthviews@med.va.gov

Mailing address:
Jill Zahn
Milwaukee VA Medical Center Library
5000 W. National Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53295

Important note: We are not able to **mail** this newsletter to you. It can be found in waiting rooms of your VA Medical Center and outpatient clinics.

You can also subscribe to the electronic version of this newsletter through the VISN 12 internet site at

<http://www.vagreatlakes.org>

Click on the *Public Affairs* button, then click on *Publications and Newsletters*.